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Umbrella Revolution: Inside Hong Kong's biggest protest in decades

The civil disobedience campaign is about more than open elections — it's about the city's relationship with the Chinese government, whose recent policies have left Hong Kongers feeling politically and economically constrained.

From September 26 to December 15, 2014, Hong Kongers staged a series of sit-in street protests over proposed reforms to the city's electoral system.

China had initially promised that by 2017, Hong Kongers would be able to elect their top leader, the chief executive, by universal suffrage. Currently, Hong Kong's chief executive is chosen by a "nominating committee" of 1,200 people, most of whom are elites who support the policies of the Chinese government.

But in August 2014, the Chinese government said that "while citizens would be allowed to vote for the chief executive, the candidates for the election would have to be approved by a special committee."

The decision was widely denounced as highly restrictive and tantamount to pre-screening candidates.

On September 22, student protesters began leading a peaceful demonstration against China's election plan. They demanded the right to nominate and directly elect their chief executive. They also called for the current chief executive, Leung Chun-ying, to resign.

On September 28, the Occupy Central with Love and Peace movement announced the beginning of a civil disobedience campaign, timed to build off the momentum of the student protest. Demonstrators peacefully occupied Hong Kong's city government headquarters along with other major city intersections.



(Photo: Pasu Au Yeung/Flickr)

But the police responded by shooting tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd.

To ward off the chemicals, demonstrators covered themselves in plastic wrap and wore goggles and surgical masks. But the movement's most recognizable symbol have been the open umbrellas that protestors were using to deflect pepper spray.

More than 900 people were arrested, although the government has brought charges against fewer than one-tenth of them. Those found guilty have been mostly sentenced to probation

or community service — with the exceptions of protest leaders Joshua Wong, Nathan Law, and Alex Chow, who received prison sentences.

Still, it was always unlikely that the protestors would see their demands fulfilled: if Hong Kong were allowed to elect a pro-democracy candidate, the Communist Party's political control over both Hong Kong and China itself could be undermined.

Indeed, when the protests ended after 79 days — due to demonstrators' exhaustion and organizers' internal fractures — it was without any policy

concessions from the government.

In any case, many Hong Kong residents had actively opposed the movement, fearing violent reprisals from China.

As an older woman named Chan said, "Those of us who came to the city 60 or 70 years ago had nothing and we worked and suffered so much to make Hong Kong the rich city it is today. And now the protesters have made our society unstable. For me, being able to eat and sleep is already a luxury. I don't need democracy. What does it mean?"

Hong Kong pro-democracy lawmakers disqualified from parliament



Yau Wai-ching unfurls a banner that says "Hong Kong is Not China" before taking the Legislative Council Oath at the first meeting of the Sixth Legislative Council on October 12, 2016. (Photo: AFP)

In the span of just nine months, the Hong Kong High Court has unseated six lawmakers from the 70-member Legislative Council over the manner in which they took their oaths of office when they were sworn in.

In November 2016, Sixtus "Baggio" Leung and Yau Wai-ching were disqualified for the way they delivered their oaths.

Then in July 2017, "Long Hair" Leung Kwok-hung, Nathan Law Kwun-chung, Lau Siu-lai, and Edward Yiu Chung-yim were disqualified for their mannerisms during the ceremony.

All six lawmakers were young, pro-democracy activists who ran in the first major election following the 2014 Umbrella Revolution.

The High Court ruled that oath-taking must be done strictly by the book with no additions or deviations — before, during or after an oath.

According to Justice Thomas Au Hing-cheung, "It is also not only to provide a legal basis to check and punish future breaches by the oath taker... it is also a constitutional legal

requirement that the oath taker, in taking the oath, must also sincerely and truly believe in the pledges under the oath that he or she is taking."

Justice Au added that the purpose of Hong Kong's mini-constitution, known as the Basic Law, was to establish the territory as an "inalienable part of the People's Republic of China."

While the National People's Congress Standing Committee has the power to interpret the Basic Law, they could have implemented more restrained responses that do not involve reversing voters' decisions.

Lily Ng, who voted for Nathan Law, was enraged that her vote no longer counted. "Ordinary people don't have a lot of power in Hong Kong, and now this most important right has been stolen from us. What's the point of elections if they are meaningless?"

The disqualifications of the six lawmakers mean that the pro-democracy camp has lost its veto power over major legislation, one of the most powerful tools in a parliament stacked with pro-establishment legislators.

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China breaches “one country, two systems” policy in Hong Kong



The 1997 ceremony where Hong Kong was handed over from British to Chinese rule. (Photo: Torsten Blackwood/AFP/Getty Images)

According to China, “Hong Kong is China’s domestic affair. Foreign countries have no right to interfere.”

In 2016, Britain released a report outlining its concerns over mainland China’s interference in Hong Kong’s legal affairs — prompting China to respond in anger.

In the report, British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said that he was concerned about the “integrity of Hong Kong’s law enforcement.”

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang responded that Britain should “stop meddling in Hong Kong affairs,” as Hong Kong is now a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China.

Technically though, Britain does have a limited obligation to Hong Kong. Under the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, Britain transferred control of Hong Kong to China under the “one country, two systems” arrangement, which grants Hong

Kong limited autonomy and control of its own legal affairs. As a signatory to the agreement, Britain is therefore legally bound to uphold these freedoms in Hong Kong.

Nevertheless, one year later, China would essentially dismiss the bilateral treaty as irrelevant.

“Now that Hong Kong has returned to the motherland for 20 years, the Sino-British Joint Declaration, as a historical document, no longer has any realistic meaning,” said Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang.

“It also does not have any binding power on how the Chinese central government administers Hong Kong. Britain has no sovereignty, no governing power and no supervising power over Hong Kong. I hope relevant parties will take note of this reality.”

Emigration from Hong Kong hits three-year high amidst tensions with China

Hong Kong may be known as one of the safest and most law-abiding cities in Asia, but in the wake of recent political events, thousands of Hong Kongers are now looking to make their future elsewhere.

The latest government data shows that the number of Hongkongers trying to emigrate reached a three-year high in 2016, with an 8.6% increase in the number of locals applying for immigration visas.

Top destinations for Hong Kongers include Australia, the United States, Canada, and Taiwan.

Hong Kong appears to be suffering a kind of “brain drain,” as a majority of the people looking to emigrate are from the elite class. Additionally, most applicants are couples who both hold a master’s degree.

Additionally, a survey by independent think tank Civic Exchange in June 2016 showed that some 42% of Hong Kong residents want to leave.

70% of 1,500 people surveyed said Hong Kong had become “worse” or “much worse” to live in. Their biggest concerns were housing, the “quality of government” and education.

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Taiwan has an electoral system. You can vote unsuitable politicians out of office. But in Hong Kong we can't.

— Martin Wan (25), who was born in Hong Kong but emigrated to Taiwan in 2016 to start a business.

The Sino-British Joint Declaration

The Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed by the respective governments of the United Kingdom (UK) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on December 19, 1984. It gave rise to Hong Kong’s handover, where the UK transferred sovereignty over Hong Kong to China with effect from July 1, 1997.

According to the “one country, two systems” principle, Hong Kong was to maintain largely independent political, legal, and economic systems from China for 50 years, until 2047.

Hong Kong's housing crisis: Life inside "coffin cubicles"

Forced out by sky-high rents, Hong Kong's poorest feel that living in a cage is still better than living on the street.

Behind Hong Kong's glamorous facade of neon lights and towering skyscrapers, approximately 200,000 people — including 40,000 children — live in cage-like spaces ranging between 15-100 square feet in size.

It's an inadequate response to the conflicting issues of land constraints and unsustainable population growth: Hong Kong has almost no developable land remaining, but its population size is nearing 7.5 million, which has caused its housing market to become the most expensive in the world. A small one-bedroom apartment can cost HK\$16,000 (US\$2,050) a month.

Pushed out by skyrocketing rents, Hong Kong's poorest are forced to live in unsafe, cramped, and inadequate living conditions. They are crammed into wire mesh boxes stacked on top of each other, measuring as small as 6' x 2.5' each — the size of a coffin. The resultant space is too small to stand up in. But on average, the rent runs only about HK\$1,500 (US\$192) per year.

To help address the issue, the Hong Kong government is committed to

increasing affordable housing options — but this is, obviously, easier said than done. There are more than 220,000 people on the waitlist for public housing, and the average wait is almost three years.

In 2014, when some illegally tenanted buildings were evicted, only five out of 100 tenants were reportedly offered public housing alternatives.

"It's not whether I believe [the government] or not, but they always talk this way. What hope is there?" said Leung, a person who has been living in cage homes since he stopped working at a market stall after losing part of a finger 20 years ago.

Holding just a secondary school education, Leung has only been able to find intermittent casual work. His sole income is HK\$4,000 (US\$513) in government assistance each month.

"It's impossible for me to save," said Leung, who is unmarried and has no children to lean on for support.

Photographer Benny Lam wrote on his Facebook page: "You may wonder



Yan Chi Keung, 57, reads the newspaper in his cage home in Hong Kong. It is impossible to know how many such cages there are because so many of them are run illegally. The estimated number shot from a few thousand in the early 1990s to 53,000 in 2007. (Photo: Brian Cassey)

why we should care, as these people are not a part of our lives. They are exactly the people who come into your life every single day: they are serving you as the waiters in the restaurants where you eat, they are the security guards in the shopping malls you wander around, or the cleaners and the delivery men on the streets you pass through. The only difference between us and them is [their homes]. This is a question of human dignity."

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I'm still alive, and yet I am already surrounded by four coffin planks!

— An anonymous cage home dweller, as told to Benny Lam for SoCO, an NGO fighting for policy changes and decent living standards in the city.



Retiree Kong Sui Kao, 64, lives in a cramped room alongside 17 other people on the roof of a 12-storey block. (Photo: Brian Cassey)



Over the last 10 years, the number of cage homes made of wire mesh has decreased, but they've been replaced by beds sealed with wooden planks. (Photo: Benny Lam)



The United Nations has condemned the living conditions in these sub-divided units as "an insult to human dignity." (Photo: Benny Lam)

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The case of Hong Kong's disappearing booksellers

The abductions represent yet another sign that the “one country, two systems” formula protecting Hong Kong’s autonomy from mainland China is steadily being eroded.

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Between October and December 2015, five Hong Kong-based book publishers went missing.

The five publishers were linked to Mighty Current, an obscure Hong Kong publishing company that churns out gossipy titles about China and its top political leaders.

Some time later, the booksellers would turn up in police custody in mainland China — but China has been reluctant to provide information, saying only that some of the missing booksellers were being investigated for unspecified “illegal activity.”

As a result, the British government released a statement asserting that one of the booksellers, Lee Bo, had been “involuntarily removed to the mainland without any due process under Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) law.”

On December 30, 2015, Lee, who was an editor at Mighty Current, received a phone order for a dozen

books, including several about the private life of Chinese President Xi Jinping. That evening, Lee went to get the books in a warehouse in a quiet part of town. He never returned.

A few days after his disappearance, Lee called his wife and faxed a message to colleagues saying he was “O.K.” and had gone to mainland China “in his own way.”

However, Lee’s wife had found his travel documents at home — raising suspicions that he had been abducted and forcibly brought to the mainland by Chinese government operatives.

Subsequently, the Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* reported that footage from the surveillance cameras at the book warehouse showed Lee being shadowed by strangers as he walked into an elevator.

In January 2016, another one of the missing booksellers, Gui Minhai, appeared on Chinese state television and tearfully confessed to a fatal

drink-driving accident from over a decade ago. He added that his return to China had been voluntary.

If in fact orchestrated by mainland China, the disappearances would violate Hong Kong’s mini-constitution, the Basic Law, which grants Hong Kongers various political freedoms independent of Chinese law — such as freedom of the press and freedom from arbitrary arrests.

To further complicate matters, in June 2016, another missing bookseller, Lam Wing-Kee, spoke at a surprise news conference about being kidnapped and detained by Chinese “special forces.” He also claimed that the booksellers’ televised confessions had been scripted.

In response, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, “Lam Wing-Kee is a Chinese citizen, and he has violated China’s laws on the mainland. Relevant authorities in China are authorised to handle the case in accordance with the law.”

Hong Kong soccer fans jeer national anthem

In the United States, athletes protest when the national anthem is played. But in Hong Kong, it's the fans who do.

For the past two years now, whenever the Chinese national anthem has played during a Hong Kong men's soccer match, Hong Kong fans would turn their backs, boo, and even raise their middle fingers — all in protest of mainland China's growing influence in Hong Kong's affairs.

Although it's been a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China since 1997, Hong Kong still competes with its own team in major international competitions.

So in September 2017, the government of mainland China

passed a retaliatory law prohibiting disrespect of the anthem. In particular, people who do not “stand with respect” and “maintain a dignified bearing” when it is played could face 15 days' detention, with the possibility of further criminal charges.

The anthem law went into effect on October 1, 2017. But Hong Kong maintains a semiautonomous existence that allows it to keep its own economic and legal systems. So Hong Kong will need to enact its own version of the law — which its government is currently working on doing.



(Photo: Bobby Yip/Reuters)

Critics of the anthem law worry that it could be used to suppress freedom of expression.

Dennis Kwok, a member of Hong Kong's Legislative Council, pointed out that applying the law could prove tricky. “What does it mean to be respectful of the national anthem? That concept of law is simply unheard-of here, to have to stand in silence. I think we need to be very careful defining what is respectful and what is not.”

On the other hand, Hong Kong's chief executive, Carrie Lam, said that

the issue need not be politicized even though it is “very serious.” She went on to clarify “that this is an issue of respect for the nation and whether you recognize that you are Chinese.”

But for now, the prospect of legal consequences has not deterred fans with pro-democracy beliefs from continuing to boo at games.

“[The anthem law] does dampen our freedom of speech, forcing us to respect something,” said 24-year-old Sanho Chung. “I worry, but I will still practice my rights. I think this is my right.”



(Photo: InMedia)

Free speech curtailed at Hong Kong universities

When the 2017 school term kicked off at Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), posters calling for independence from mainland China were put up across campus.

Following media backlash, 10 universities issued a joint statement saying, “We treasure freedom of expression, but we condemn its recent abuses,” to the extent that the very notion of independence is not permitted under Hong Kong's mini-constitution, the Basic Law.

But Article 27 of the Basic Law

stipulates that “Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication.”

“Universities are supposed to be the last bastions to defend these values [of free speech], but instead they became the first ones to try to control [us],” said Justin Au, president of CUHK's student union.

Students from mainland China felt differently. As a student named Kwan put it, “The freest people are those who follow the rules. Those who don't will feel oppressed everywhere.”