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Letter from Hong Kong-Youthful naiveté versus a sclerotic state

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Guest Column by Dr Kumar David

Bright young faces, technically savvy, nimble of mind, polite and controlled in protest; 30 years of intimacy with Hong Kong, nearly 25 in universities in HK and China had not prepared me for this fortnight. I have not before seen the youthful flower of Hong Kong's future bloom so bright; but not without its share of blunders costing it the public support it had initially garnered.

Thankfully, the control freaks in Beijing kept their tanks garaged and HK's adults were shown-up as deficient of pluck and dim of wit; but the city will not be the same again. First in little ripples and then in waves, the debate about democracy will infiltrate the Mainland and the emerging economic superpower will change at its fabled glacial pace. "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air". Unseen until this autumn blooming, naïve in strategy, and green in cunning, first flowers are always blown away. But they waste not their sweetness in Hong Kong's 'pragmatic' air nor wither in Beijing's Stalinist wilderness; in a globalised age, blossoming is quickened.

Strolling through Mong Kong and Admiralty, late on the evening of the sixth day (Saturday 4) of the Occupy Central protest, I estimated twenty thousand young idealists still there, much thinner than the 120,000 at the peak. The majority were students, but a companion of my stroll pointed out, a large number were not, they were just young people; the new working class ignorant sociologists still call middle-class. Occupying the main boulevards, pavements, and shopping arcades; sitting on the ground, happy in groups; speakers offering their encouragement here and there; it was three-quarters serious politics, one-quarter a carnival of youthful exuberance. Later in the night the crowd swelled, TV stations estimate to 100,000. Throughout five days they drifted in and out, went to university for a lecture and returned, dropped in at home for well earned sleep and popped back; some joined in the evening, after work. The cumulative number involved at some point in what is called the Umbrella Revolution was very much in excess of 200,000.

The reason for youth activism on this scale is not only romantic attachment to democracy; there are practical reasons as well. As HK's filthy rich amass ever greater wealth, the income gap is widening and anger rising. Mainland graduates, some extraordinarily bright, are moving into HK middle level jobs and university postings in larger numbers, putting pressure on locals. Corruption in the Mainland is grotesque and palpable thanks to easy cross-border travel. Totalitarianism in China has cooled HK's love affair with the motherland. But a green youth movement is fickle as fluctuations in participation, and naive as interpolation of trivial demands (Chief Executive resign! Occupy government offices!) with crucial ones about universal suffrage, show. The refusal to suspend sit-ins when the peak was past (tens of thousands dwindled to a few hundreds) and after public annoyance at protracted blocking of major roads came to a boil, is a consequence of stubborn student elements hijacking the action in the final stages. Now not the authorities, but the public is being punished.

Beijing and its satraps in HK have conceded nothing; no concessions from the control freaks crouching in terror that democracy in Hong Kong will spark counter-revolution in all China. We in South Asia remember the Salt March when Gandhiji broke unjust laws in 1930 and sparked mass civil disobedience against the Raj changing world attitudes to Indian independence - the Swaraj struggle drew millions. Batons on the heads of non-violent protesters was global news and demonstrated the effective use of satyagraha against injustice. Indian democracy is exasperating and it is gauche in economic management and decision making but it survives by muddling through. In the long run it is more stable than brittle Stalinism and would have absorbed an Indian version of Tiananmen 1989 or Hong Kong 2014 without a possible defeat of the authorities endangering the existence of the state.

Hong Kong's 'pragmatists'

HK's silent majority describes itself as 'pragmatic' and there are grounds for its complacency. The resounding economic success of China and HK's position as a financial metropolis prove an old and banal materialist adage about human motivation. Economic conditions to lubricate demands for change in political status quo are missing in HK; who wants democracy if your wallet is well-lined! Of course mega-rich tycoons, a few dozen, are the great beneficiaries, but for reasons reaching back to the turmoil in China in the 1930s and 1940s and consequent large migrations into HK, a society facilitating rapid social mobility has emerged. Hundreds of thousands have moved up to a

comfortable middle class. A property owning, stock-market invested, well-heeled upper middle-class tops it. Sheer effort, aided by thriving capitalism, helped these classes prosper in the last fifty years.

One significant side that I cannot explore here is that people under 30 grew up and schooled in post-British HK. The older generation cherishes memories of liberalism, fair play and lawfulness. HK's ICAC is an exemplary bastion against corruption; the police force is appreciated, balanced in action and not corrupted by political misuse. Chris Patton the last Governor was much loved by HK Chinese, but it is not possible to say that the three post-1997 Chief Executives are well respected. The past has fed complacency in the adult generation, but HK's young see a different home town and have grown up beside a strange giant. This generation is not in awe of sclerotic state and status quo.

Adults don't want the apple cart to tumble. The working class below them is reasonably paid and housed, children schooled and social mobility in the last three decades has been astonishing – more brisk than in the US. Many, maybe most of my colleagues on the university staff are from working class backgrounds. However, continuity has snapped and the next generation, the 15 to 30 year olds, have turned away. I am bewildered by the sharpness of the generation gap; 80% of protesters are young people; maybe 80% of the older generation are 'pragmatists'.

The 'pragmatists' say, sincerely, that the Communist Party's control of China (not their Hong Kong) ensures stability, and fear that if it loses its grip the country will slide into chaos and anarchy. The mega-rich on the other hand are cynical tycoons; their bond with Beijing a passport to amass wealth. They are not a vibrant class of creative capitalists, not entrepreneurs, original innovators and inspired captains of finance; this is a class of leeches grabbing state lands at auctions, putting up conurbations of flats and malls and making billions in sales. This is not progressive capitalism; Hong Kong's tycoons are a class of parasitic property retainers. The Hong Kong miracle is a unique mix of circumstances; a motivated and educated middle class, an industrious working class, the rule of law bequeathed by the British Raj, and a fortuitous location snuggled beside Napoleon's waking giant.

I am persuaded that over the coming years the achievement of the Occupy movement will not be any concessions it wins from Beijing (it will win nothing, nor did the Salt March from the British), but the debate it will spark off about HK's constitutional future. The 'pragmatist' majority says: "The powers in Beijing have made a decision; they will not budge or bend, they will rather send in tanks and shoot the city's youth". Dictators do not relinquish power; they pull the trigger on unarmed protesters; they showed their hand in Tiananmen Square on June 4 1989. Still not one person have I met, heard on TV, or read in the media, defends the National People's Convention's "universal suffrage" scam for electing the Chief Executive in 2017. 'Pragmatists' agree that the youth-student movement is morally right, but criticise its 'suicidal idealism, hitting its head on a stone wall'. I have heard distraught mothers moan to protestor offspring; "what's the point of being morally right and then mowed down by grapeshot".

The crux of the constitutional issue

Why do I call Beijing's plan a deception? China repeatedly, verbally and in treaties promised the people of Hong Kong wide autonomy, a one-country two-system formula, progress to democracy and universal suffrage. This was said in Sino-British negotiations and in the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law (Hong Kong's mini constitution), Article 45 of which reads as follows.

“The method for selecting the Chief Executive shall be specified in the light of the actual situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress. The ultimate aim is the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures”.

The CCP's version of universal suffrage is this: We will nominate (through a handpicked electoral college) two persons for Chief Executive and HK compatriots can, by “universal suffrage”, elect one of them. Eureka! China has by and large kept promises (it is punctilious about international treaties) but is now rolling back its pledges to Hong Kong. Surely wide autonomy means that except for defence and foreign affairs HK will make its decisions and run its own affairs. According to Chris Patton there was no thought of Beijing, instead of the local Government and Legislative Council, designing the electoral system within, of course, the provisions of the Basic Law. Beijing has short changed the territory and many are justifiably outraged, even ‘pragmatists’ are disappointed.

The Occupy Central movement and the student groups have forced Hong Kong society to face reality. Now on will be a hard grind; the first task is to win over a majority in HK itself; till then Beijing will concede nothing. The movement now needs unity, a federated structure, a leadership that has vision and is respected and accepted by all; it must push thick-skulled student extremists out of decision making; above all it needs a strategy and realistic medium term goals.

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