



Hong Kong protests on July, 21.  
PC: @photochoi.

## Governing Hong Kong like any other Chinese City

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On 21 July, Hong Kong had a hair-raising night. In Central, where the city's business district is located, riot police fired tear gas and rubber bullets into crowds of protesters gathered for the anti-extradition bill march organised by the Civil Human Rights Front, a coalition of pro-democracy activists. At around 11pm at the Yuen Long subway station, in a district located in the northwest part of the city, a hundred people dressed in white and armed with rods—suspected to be triad gangsters—chased and beat up people whom they thought were protestors all over the station. In the assault that took place in the station lobby, on the platform, and inside train carriages, ordinary citizens, journalists, and even a lawmaker were attacked and injured. Live-broadcasted at the same time by many online media outlets, the two scenes were perceived by Hong Kong citizens and the international community as a proof of the collusion between the local police and triad gangs to strike back against the anti-extradition bill movement. In fact, the incidents provide some significant insights into the future of civil society and social movements in Hong Kong.

The existence of complicated relations between the Hong Kong government and gangs is hardly something new for Hong Kong citizens. At the Yuen Long subway station, police officers arrived only after the armed mob had left. Soon after, when asked why no 'men in white' were arrested at the scene, a police commander claimed that 'no one was seen with offensive weapons'. These circumstances reinforced the people's belief that the incident was a well-planned operation aimed at intimidating anti-government protestors. Still, although this collusion was appalling to Hong Kong citizens, I believe that the worst is yet to come.

It has become increasingly evident that Chief Executive Carrie Lam is no longer really the 'commander in chief'—in all aspects except in name, she has been replaced in this role by the Central

Government in Beijing. Over the past two months, for instance, multiple pro-police and pro-government demonstrations have been mobilised by pro-Beijing networks in Hong Kong. These demonstrations along with the Yuen Long attacks provide us with some clues regarding possible governance strategies that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could implement to deal with the situation in Hong Kong.

Some people suspect that the Central Government in Beijing aims to draw on the methods utilised in Xinjiang to implement heavy-handed rule in Hong Kong, such as by running relentless campaigns against local culture and forcibly assimilating people through CCP thoughtwork. However, such a scenario is highly unlikely considering that the cost of such Orwellian rule is extremely high. Moreover, due to Hong Kong's cosmopolitan status, applying this kind of model to the city would surely invite violent opposition both locally and internationally. Another more viable strategy is to learn from the governance model adopted in other cities in mainland China, where the Public Security Bureau (公安) and the Urban Management Bureau (城管) cooperate closely and utilise high-tech surveillance systems to 'maintain stability' (维稳). Once this governance model is replicated in Hong Kong, assisted by technologies such as those underpinning the emerging social credit system, the CCP will be in a position to systematically and thoroughly keep any dissident voice under surveillance. To effectively implement this strategy, the CCP would not only require support from local gangs and the middle- and upper-classes of the city, but would also need to domesticate local civil society and academia.

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The core groups in the recent anti-government movements are mainly composed of NGO members with varying amounts of influence in Hong Kong's civil society. Hong Kongese civil society has developed a high-level of autonomy from the government since the social movements of the 1960s, and some professional sectors, such as social workers, have maintained a strong tradition of critical thinking and civic engagement. As a result, if the CCP attempts to assert control over Hong Kong's social workers and NGOs with the same strategy used in mainland China—by requiring 'Party-building' in social work organisations and changing them into 'Party service centres'—strong opposition from Hong Kong civil society is to be expected.

However, in dealing with local NGOs, the CCP can take advantage of different types of 'centralised systems' that have been well-developed in Hong Kong since colonial times. Very often, Hong Kong has been seen as a textbook example of a

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Academia is likely to become another target. Since the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the CCP has been treating the higher education sector as a seedbed of anti-government movements, which are accused of colluding with 'hostile foreign forces'.

'free market' society. However, in many aspects, especially in social and welfare services, the Hong Kong government intervenes heavily. Through these service interventions, the government centralises and allocates resources. Today, nearly half of Hong Kong's population lives in houses subsidised by the government; nearly 90 percent of the hospital beds are publicly funded; most established and large NGOs in Hong Kong receive 'lump sum grants' annually from the government for recruiting social workers and supporting their service programmes. In the education sector, all public universities in Hong Kong receive sizable block grants and research grants to support their teaching and research programmes. These centralised systems for the allocation of resources have far-reaching implications for Hong Kong's civil society. For instance, although Hong Kong's civil society is generally seen as vibrant and independent, under this centralised system many small- and medium-sized NGOs active in supporting pro-democracy and human rights movements do not receive much funding from the government. This results in Hong Kong having an active but structurally weak civil society.

Although 'Party-building' in Hong Kong's NGOs is not realistic in the short term, Beijing can still work through these centralised systems to achieve a similar effect. By marginalising 'dissident groups' via the government funding allocation system and simultaneously 'incubating' pro-Beijing organisations, the CCP can fundamentally transform the composition of Hong Kong civil society, making it more pliable to its demands.

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Academia is likely to become another target. Since the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the CCP has been treating the higher education sector as a seedbed of anti-government movements, which are accused of colluding with 'hostile foreign forces'. Scholars active in social movements are thorns in the side of the pro-Beijing camp. Apart from jailing Hong Kong scholars and students on trumped-up charges, the CCP will probably exploit the mechanism through which the government of Hong Kong allocates budget and research funding to public and private universities. Consequently, courses and research programmes on undesired topics—such as social movements in Hong Kong, approval ratings of Hong Kong government officials, and 'stability maintenance' in China—will be marginalised or shuttered. If this occurs, research proposals and course materials will end up having to be approved by the Party branch at universities, just like is happening in mainland China.

In fact, ‘China’ is a hot topic among Hong Kong scholars and there already are different forms of research and teaching cooperation between universities in Hong Kong and the mainland. Today, when Hong Kong scholars want to conduct research in the mainland, they have to ‘settle’ in partner universities in the mainland. Research proposals and details are subjected to approval by the Party branch at the host university, which makes conducting critical research on sensitive topics almost impossible. As a result, the Hong Kong system is already being assimilated gradually into the China system.

In the end, we should not hold our breath waiting for a single dramatic event or for the authorities in Beijing to formally announce the end of Hong Kong as we know it. Hong Kong’s assimilation into the mainland governance regime will most likely be accomplished subtly and through systems and infrastructures that are already well developed. As such, opposing Beijing’s growing influence in Hong Kong is not enough. It is also necessary to critically examine the structure of governance in the city and to identify the existing structures that are facilitating Hong Kong’s ongoing transformation. ■