

CURING HONG KONG'S POLITICAL ILLS

BY LIU XIAOBO

On July 1, 2004, an estimated 530,000 Hong Kong residents took to the streets in the latest mass demonstration for civil and political rights. In this article posted on the Internet shortly before the protest, Liu Xiaobo calls on the Beijing government to take the necessary steps to ease its increasingly acrimonious relationship with the former British colony.

The essence of the Hong Kong problem is the antagonism between dictatorship and democracy. If Beijing wants reconciliation and amicable engagement between the government and the people, it must take a democratic approach with the people of Hong Kong.

In the 1980s, I once stopped over for a week in Hong Kong on my way from Scandinavia to the United States. Hong Kong's freedom, prosperity and order, as well as its genial, law-abiding and hard-working people, made a deep impression on me. I came away with very positive feelings about British colonial rule. Consequently, I wrote an essay for *Zhengming* magazine entitled "May Hong Kong Remain Forever Free." I was also interviewed by Jin Zhong, chief editor of *Jiefang* magazine (now *Kaifang*). Describing my feelings about Hong Kong, I said, "If it took Hong Kong a century of colonial rule to become what it is today, it will certainly take a country the size of China 300 years of colonialism to become like Hong Kong."

I never expected that after June 4, 1989 this statement would be used by the Chinese government as their main evidence in accusing me of betraying China. To this day, mainland Chinese "patriots" often cite these words to level moral accusations against me. The Beijing rulers argue that "Hong Kong must be governed by patriots," and have resorted to the sort of mass criticism and repudiation that were common during the Cultural Revolution to attack Hong Kong's pro-democracy camp and to denigrate its representatives as traitors.

After the June 4th Massacre, more than one million Hong Kong people took to the streets in protest. From then on, Beijing worried that Hong Kong would become an anticommunist base, and the people of Hong Kong worried about preserving

their freedoms after the territory's reversion to Chinese sovereignty. As a result, during the final years of a colonial system of freedom without democracy, the last governor of Hong Kong began to promote the democratization of Hong Kong's political system, and the law-abiding people of Hong Kong also began to pursue democracy. After free Hong Kong reverted to mainland China in 1997, and particularly after Tung Chee-hwa renewed his term of office [in February 2002], there was a push, on Beijing's insistence, to quickly implement Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law, spurring Hong Kong people into a new civil movement to press for their democratic rights. As a result, Hong Kong, formerly known as an international business center, has increasingly become a political battlefield where the government is pitted against the people: Article 23 vs. the July 1 march; economic co-opting vs. political rights; "patriots" ruling Hong Kong vs. Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong; "one country, one system" vs. "one country, two systems"; opposition to popular elections vs. demand for such elections; the suppression of outspoken commentators vs. freedom of the press. On the surface, the conflict between the government and the people appears to be a tension between the central government and a locality and the incompatibility of "one country" and "two systems"; but in fact, the real issue is the struggle between those who seek to uphold autocracy and those who strive for democracy.

This clear opposition between the government and the citizenry initially found expression in a direct clash between the Hong Kong government and the popular will. After the protest on July 1, 2003, Beijing disregarded the Hong Kong government and began to intervene directly in Hong Kong affairs. Since then, the conflict has increasingly become a clash between the Beijing government and the people of Hong Kong. Beijing's constitutional experts have joined the battle, Beijing officials stationed in Hong Kong have declared their positions, Hong Kong businessmen beholden to Beijing have let loose torrents of abuse. The National People's Congress flouted the law and ruled against popular elections [for the chief executive] in 2007 and [for all the seats in the legislature] in 2008, a senior official, Liu Yandong, went to Hong Kong to silence the democracy activists, and even high officials from Guangdong Province and Shenzhen coerced Hong Kong people to turn their backs on the pro-democracy camp. Yet

Hong Kong people, who had been given no say in their change of sovereignty, became increasingly aware that in the face of a dictatorial government, their only hope of safeguarding their existing liberties lay in insisting on the democratic right to universal suffrage. With Hong Kong's pro-democracy camp and mainstream public opinion facing the growing threat of brute suppression, and with no recourse within the system, the politics of the street have become the only option.

CCP leaders and the influential figures beholden to them accusingly question Hong Kong people at every turn: "Why didn't you demand democracy when you were a British colony? Now that you have returned to the embrace of the motherland and the central government has given you far more democracy than you enjoyed when the British ruled Hong Kong, why do you still make all this incessant noise about democracy? You persist in plunging Hong Kong into chaos and harming China with your street protests." Chinese leaders also question the motives of the international community's concern for Hong Kong: "Given that under British rule there was no democracy in Hong Kong, how come neither the United States nor Britain ever showed any interest in whether Hong Kong was a democracy? Now that Hong Kong has returned to the embrace of the motherland, all you do is criticize and condemn. You clearly have an ulterior motive."

These accusations contain a kernel of historical truth, but they also hide a more important fact: Behind the British administration in Hong Kong was a free Britain, and its governance of Hong Kong was constrained by British democratic constitutionalism. Behind Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, on the other hand, is the Chinese dictatorship, and Tung governs only in accordance with the dictatorial will of his masters. Why should Hong Kong people have confidence in a regime that wantonly expropriated the people's property during the Maoist period, that violates human rights to the point of taking innocent life, and that committed the Tiananmen massacre that shocked the entire world in 1989? Why should Hong Kong people trust a chief executive who takes orders from despots?

Since Hong Kong reverted to mainland Chinese rule, the poor performance of the puppet government instituted by Beijing has become obvious to all. In the political sphere, the puppet government has been an accomplice to tyranny, to say nothing of the economic disruption it has caused. The people of Hong Kong have seen their liberties eroded one by one. In particular, the Hong Kong government attempted to impose on Hong Kong an anti-subversion law based on Article 23 of the Basic Law. If this law had been passed, the people of Hong Kong would have risked losing fundamental institutional guarantees of their freedom. Therefore, the more aware Hong Kong people have become that the chief executive appointed by Beijing is not to be trusted, the more they strive for direct elections to choose their own political representatives. As long as a dictatorial regime rules out democracy and a timetable for Hong Kong's democratization is nowhere in sight, taking to the streets to demand democratic rights is inevitably the only way for Hong Kong people to resist the dictatorship. In the words of Hong Kong Bishop Joseph Zen, the danger is greatest when the powerless are voiceless.

Although Beijing cannot outwardly renounce its purported commitment to "one country, two systems," "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong" and a "high degree of autonomy," in reality it can even less afford to abandon its plans to reform Hong Kong's political system according to its own interests. Therefore, as Beijing has perceived that the current Hong Kong government is unable to master the situation, it hesitates even less to engage in strong-arm tactics. Today, the initiative for political reforms that were originally the responsibility of Hong Kong administrators is no longer in the hands of Hong Kong people, or of the Legislative Council, or even of the Hong Kong government: the decisions are all made in the secret chambers of Zhongnanhai in Beijing. In the birdcage politics of Hong Kong, the more the reforms progress, the more hermetically sealed Hong Kong becomes: Beijing has rejected popular elections for the chief executive and for the entirety of the seats in the legislature. Having the final word, Beijing has also dropped plans to increase the number of popularly elected legislators and to hold direct elections for members of the functional constituencies. As for the three-member Constitutional Development Task Force, it has produced nothing more than some empty phrases on scraps of paper. It all amounts to a series of arbitrary decisions by Beijing designed to gradually reduce the space available to Hong Kong people to participate in public politics. By ruling against direct elections for the chief executive and all the seats in the legislature, Beijing has eliminated the most fundamental channel available to the people of Hong Kong to participate in political reform.

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Whenever a society experiences a conflict between the government and the people, and great multitudes of ordinary citizens take to the streets in protest, it is usually because channels for solving problems within the system are no longer available to them. In Hong Kong, the level of political participation and the right to participate in the political system have been rapidly eroded. This has inevitably resulted in growing resistance outside the political system. Put another way: Hong Kong, which has a strong tradition of rule by law, has witnessed a rapid resurgence of the politics of the street. This resurgence produced last year's massive July 1 demonstration and this year's candlelight vigil honoring the victims of the Tiananmen Massacre 15 years ago (which drew many more people than previous vigils), and constitutes the greatest expansion of political participation by the people of Hong Kong since 1991. Given that Beijing and its puppet Hong Kong government show utter disregard for the will of the people and that the channels for Hong Kong people to participate in politics have been narrowed and even cut off, the politics of the street is the only avenue left for effective participation in politics.

Beijing knows perfectly well that the pro-democracy camp is the engine and organizer of the politics of the street, but Beijing is completely lacking in good faith toward it. Other than

trying to influence public opinion by slandering the pro-democracy camp, Beijing's policy is one of suppression through cold rejection, and it will not countenance conciliation even on tactical grounds. After Hong Kong people who criticize Beijing's dictatorial policies have had their home-return permits [to travel to the mainland] revoked, and democracy advocates are neither invited by Beijing nor allowed to enter the mainland, how can Hong Kong democrats be expected to sit at home and await their doom? How dare Beijing accuse the pro-democracy camp of plunging Hong Kong into chaos and harming China with its demonstrations?

By the standards of Hong Kong society, there is nothing normal about the fact that since the row over the proposed Article 23 anti-subversion law erupted, political demonstrations have become far larger and more frequent. The intensification of the politics of the street shows that the conflict between the government and the people has reached boiling point. Having lost all hope of a solution within the political system, and deeply distrustful of the Beijing regime and its Hong Kong government, Hong Kong people have come to feel that large-scale resistance outside the system is the only means available to exercise their rights and to apply some measure of restraint on the regime's abuse of their rights.

It would be highly unlikely for hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong people, who are accustomed to freedom but not to democracy, to take to the streets in protest if Beijing stopped flagrantly interfering in their autonomy. Hong Kong is a city in which most people are middle class and do not like demonstrating on the streets. To them, the politics of the streets is neither the safest nor the most reliable way of solving political disputes. But confronted with the rigidity and arbitrariness of the Beijing regime and the fatuous incompetence of Tung Chee-hwa's administration, Hong Kong people have next to no room left to protect their freedom and promote democracy. In effect, they are left with one of two choices: either they take to the streets to express their political views, or they remain docile and silent and allow themselves to be trampled underfoot. What other, better choices are open to the people of Hong Kong? The main cause of the current sharp antagonism between the government and the people is not that the pro-democracy camp is too radical, but rather that Beijing and its puppet Hong Kong government are too high-handed. The radicalized politics of the street is in fact the result of the regime's high-handedness and abuse of authority, and the more the regime wields its power in an arbitrary manner, the more people take to the streets. It's a vicious circle.

It is in this context that several hundred thousand Hong Kong people were compelled to take to the streets in protest against Article 23. Although no one likes the politics of the streets, blindly criticizing the radicalism of the pro-democracy camp without saying a word about Beijing's high-handedness is taking the incidental for the fundamental. It is also unfair and detrimental to the smooth progress of Hong Kong's political reform. Frequent demonstrations are not beneficial for Hong Kong, but as long as Beijing refuses to change and continues its dictatorial policy of interfering by force in Hong Kong's autonomy, the people of Hong Kong will not give up

their self-initiated struggle, even for a single day. As long as Beijing continues along this path, there will be no reconciliation between the government and the people, and Hong Kong's stability and productiveness will continue to decline.

Most recently, the Hong Kong pro-democracy camp has begun calling for "reconciliation with the central government." Lau Chin-shek has proposed "taking one step back to show good will and facilitate dialogue." Martin Lee, who has been insulted by Beijing officials high and low, as well as by Hong Kong communists, for supposedly "colluding with foreign powers" and "opposing China and causing disorder in Hong Kong," is now also "pleading with the people of Hong Kong to unite and to cooperate with the central government." But Beijing has shown no appreciation for these overtures, because it considers itself the master and will not treat the pro-democracy camp as equals. Beijing treats Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian in the same commanding and arrogant manner, and has repeatedly warned that it is "listening to his words and watching his actions." Beijing's precondition for reconciliation is that Hong Kong democrats lower their heads in submission. As far as Beijing is concerned, dialogue means that democracy advocates should always do as they are told, give up their struggle for democracy and stop organizing July 1 demonstrations. Only then is Beijing willing to accept reconciliation. Beijing is adamant that if the pro-democracy camp fails to submit, and insists on discussing issues on the basis of equality, there is no point in talking about reconciliation.

Given that the pro-democracy camp has demonstrated its desire for reconciliation, Beijing should move to alleviate the distress of Hong Kong people and facilitate reconciliation and amicable engagement between the government and the people by giving up its preconditions and making the following compromises: First, enter into genuine dialogue with other political groups and the pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong. Second, stop using "patriotism" as a means to intimidate and lash out against the pro-democracy camp. Allow debates about the political system to return from the street to the political system itself. Third, stop the arbitrary revocation of home-return permits of people who hold dissenting political views. Afford democracy advocates the same right to travel to China that is given to all Hong Kong people. Fourth, respect Hong Kong's tradition of liberty. Stop all interference in Hong Kong's freedom of the press and backstage manipulation of the Legislative Council. Fifth, during the period leading up to the Legislative Council elections this September, refrain from manipulating the elections from behind the scenes and allow all of Hong Kong's political groups and parties to participate in the election in an environment of fairness and transparency.

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